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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1300)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues, to the 102nd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

Today is the first of three meetings on the human rights situation in Turkey. We begin these sessions in the wake of the complex situation following the 2016 coup attempt and the recent report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the impact of the state of emergency on human rights in Turkey.

The OHCHR report found a constantly deteriorating human rights situation, exacerbated by the erosion of the rule of law in Turkey, enabled by the continuing state of emergency. The OHCHR detailed executive interference in the judiciary and reduction of parliamentary oversight; arbitrary mass dismissals of civil servants and private sector employees; arbitrary closure of civil society organizations, including human rights NGOs and media; arbitrary detention of people arrested under the state of emergency; the use of torture during pretrial detention; restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and movement; arbitrary expropriation of private property; and methods of collective punishment targeting family members of those suspected of offences.

We have two witnesses before us today. By video conference from Cleveland, we have Kilic Bugra Kanat, Research Director of the SETA Foundation. Before us in person we have a frequent guest—namely, Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada.

Dr. Kanat, you may begin your opening remarks, and then we'll move to Mr. Neve before proceeding to questions from members of the subcommittee.

Thank you very much. Please begin.

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat (Research Director, SETA Foundation): Thank you very much for having me.

I will try to present some basic contextual information on the recent developments in Turkish politics. Then I will try to entertain questions from the committee.

Under the current government, Turkey has undergone a major political transformation in the last 15 years. The government not only adopted significant democratic reforms but also established

active civilian control of the military. With the beginning of the European Union integration process, the government implemented reform packages and complied with the requirements of the Copenhagen criteria.

Significant improvements were achieved in this period in regard to the property rights of the religious minorities. The government also launched an ambitious project of peace-building to resolve the problems of its Kurdish citizens. In fact, the democratic achievements in the country were praised by the international community and international organizations. When the Arab Spring movement grew in the Middle East, many western observers pointed to Turkey as a model country for the region.

However, while Turkey was adopting these steps, several developments in Turkey and in the region challenged the ongoing processes and effective functioning of the state machinery. The first challenge arose with the beginning of the civil wars alongside Turkey's borders. Important trade partners of Turkey, including Iraq and Syria, were not only embroiled in major civil wars but also began to export insecurity through their borders as they resembled failed states.

It also generated a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the government adopted a humanitarian refugee policy by implementing an open-door approach to all refugees fleeing from the atrocities in the region; on the other hand, it was trying to protect itself from the increasing security threats from the terrorist organization. The rise of ISIS in the region elevated the threat level in Turkey. ISIS first attacked Turkey's consulate in Mosul, and attacks started to take place within Turkey soon after.

From June 2015 to January 2017, ISIS organized the deadliest attacks in Turkish history, including an attack at the biggest nightclub in Turkey, leaving 39 people killed and 71 wounded; an attack on the biggest airport in Turkey, with 45 killed and 230 wounded; an attack on the most important tourist attraction in Turkey; and an attack on the most significant city square in Turkey. In fact through its publication, ISIS declared a total war against Turkey.

A second challenge arose shortly after the beginning of these terrorist attacks. The Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK, which was recognized as a terrorist organization by both the EU and the U.S., restarted its attacks in Turkey after announcing that it would end the ceasefire. The resolution process that included the direct talks between PKK and the Turkish state was effectively ended with this announcement.

Soon after its declaration, PKK launched terrorist attacks in major cities and city centres. In the 18-month period between July 2015 and January 2017, the group organized hundreds of terrorist attacks, some of which became the deadliest terrorist attacks in Turkish history. For instance, in an attack in downtown Ankara in the biggest local transportation hub, 37 people were killed and 125 people were injured. In an attack in downtown Istanbul at one of the biggest soccer fields in Turkey, 38 people were killed and 150 were injured.

A third challenge presented itself days after the most sophisticated terrorist attacks in Turkish history at the Istanbul airport. Turkey faced a coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Turkey had faced military *coups d'état* in its recent history. On average, every 10 years the military disturbed the political processes and organized a *coup d'état*. However, this time a group infiltrated through the military and security forces of Turkey and organized the deadliest and the most violent coup in Turkish history. Jet fighters belonging to the Turkish air force bombed the cities, the intelligence agency's headquarters, the headquarters of the special forces, the main telecommunications hub in the country, the Turkish Parliament building, and the presidential complex. While tanks ran over people in the streets of major cities, more than 250 were killed and more than 4,000 people were wounded. The coup attempt was halted by the very brave resistance of the Turkish people, who flowed to the streets of Turkey soon after the declaration of military takeover.

While Turkey was shocked by this unforeseen and unforgettable series of events, investigations shortly revealed that the organizers in the coup were mostly the members of the Gülen group. Members of the same group in the judiciary and police had organized a politically motivated operation against the elected Government of Turkey in late 2013, including the leak of a conversation between President Erdogan and his family members that had been obtained through illegal wiretaps.

• (1305)

Investigations into the events of the July 15 coup attempt revealed that the people who were leading the coup were mostly the civilian members of the group. According to witness accounts, indictments, and confessions, Adil Öksüz, a theological professor at a public university, was the person responsible for running the military operation on the night of the coup. A former police chief, who had been fired from public service because of his ties with the group, turned out to be running tanks in a military uniform that night. A businessman was taking care of target selection in the headquarters of the air forces. In fact, while people in Turkey were shocked by the violence, the state mechanism in Turkey was shocked by the internal blow it felt on the night of July 15. In the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, the government declared a state of emergency in Turkey, with the support of all major parties.

The state of emergency tried to achieve the following: to stop another possible coup attempt by the same elements from different branches of the security forces; to regain the monopoly of the use of violence for the state; to cleanse the elements that could run a parallel state within the Turkish bureaucracy; to re-establish the order in various state bureaucracies; and to acquire the inter-agency coordination against the national security threats. Considering the rapid deterioration in the capability of the Turkish security forces following the cleansing of the elements that supported the coup

attempt, the state felt more vulnerable to any form of terrorist attack and tried to halt further attack.

The threat of terrorism from the two most dangerous terrorist groups, together with the coup attempt, created a huge shock for the Turkish state. Since the beginning of the state of emergency, different government agencies tried to investigate the employees who have organizational relationships with the groups.

In the current state of Turkey, there are a lot of questions about the future of the political system. Despite concerns among some, I believe that, following the alleviation of these threats, the Turkish state will continue its journey of democratization. The sudden shock and trauma of the society and state will end with the finalization of the current investigations, for several reasons.

First, Turkey has a fast-growing middle class that espoused and embraced the democracy and democratization process. The fact that thousands of people from different ideologies and political views flowed to the streets on the night of July 15 demonstrated the willingness of the Turkish people to live in a democracy instead of in an authoritarian regime. The largest segment of this group is composed of youth who are educated and integrated into the world through different means, including social media. The surveys about youth also demonstrated a huge willingness to improve the political condition in the country. This group also includes women being rapidly empowered who have started to challenge, in recent months, not only draft legislation that generates any gender imbalance in Turkish laws, but also some religious interpretations that challenge the concept of gender equality. With such a vibrant society, it is very realistic to be optimistic about the future trajectory of Turkey.

Second, despite problems with the western allies, Turkey's government is very much committed to integration into the European Union. In the leaders' summit in Sofia last month, both sides expressed the determination and commitment for the integration process and continuation of the accession negotiations. This process will bring continuous compliance to the Copenhagen criteria.

Third, considering the possible violation of personal rights of the individuals after the coup, the government established a commission to oversee the decisions of the individual bureaucratic agencies. So far, 40,000 people have returned to their jobs and 350 foundations were re-established. In the meantime, the constitutional court of Turkey has also started to oversee individual petitions.

There is also the continuous commitment to recognize the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. Following the termination of domestic remedies, any case regarding violations of human rights can be brought to this court, and the decision of the court will overrule the decision of the Turkish courts. In one of these latest cases, both the constitutional court and the European Court of Human Rights decided that the right of personal liberty, security, and freedom of expression of two journalists were violated under the European Convention on Human Rights. The court urged Turkey to take necessary measures for the termination of pretrial detention and also held that Turkey was to pay 21,000 euros in non-pecuniary charges.

Finally, at a more practical level, democracy has been an important element within Turkey's economic dynamism and growth in recent years. Turkey is a G20 country without any oil or natural gas. It depends on economic activities such as trade, tourism, and foreign direct investment. Considering the significance of the rule of law and property rights for the flow of foreign direct investment and investors' confidence in the Turkish economy, the government will be sensitive to the economic repercussions of any decisions following this transition process.

At this critical juncture, what can Turkey's NATO allies, including Canada, do? Considering the critical security situation—

• (1310)

The Chair: Dr. Kanat, I'm going to have to ask you to please wrap up your testimony. We're right on 10 minutes.

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: Yes. I have three sentences left.

Considering the critical security situation in Turkey, co-operation with Turkey—in terms of intelligence in the fight against terrorism and national security threats against Turkey—will play an important role for Turkey to pass through this challenging period.

It is important for the allied nations to have open channels of communication, especially in such a period that necessitates the recognition and appreciation of the trauma of the Turkish state and society created by the terrorist attacks and failed coup attempts. Through these channels, the states can provide support for Turkey's investigation and express their suggestions in taking care of these investigations. During this period, the Turkish government may also be open to these reforms or suggestions and provide transparency in the security operation and timely information about the investigations.

It is in everyone's interest for Turkey to feel more secure and be more democratic at the same time, in such an unstable part of the world and at such a critical juncture of history.

Thank you very much.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kanat.

Mr. Neve, please.

Mr. Alex Neve (Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, subcommittee members. It's always a pleasure to be in front of you with respect to human rights concerns around the world.

As you will see in a moment, we have particular reason to be appreciative of the attention you are turning to Turkey. That is because on June 6 of last year, my colleague Taner Kilic, the dedicated and hard-working Chair of Amnesty International's Turkey section and a highly respected human rights and refugee lawyer, was arrested. Over 10 months later, he remains behind bars. He has been locked up for 316 days.

The charges he faces? Supporting a terrorist organization.

The evidence to back up the charges? That a popular messaging application, ByLock, is alleged to be on his phone.

Despite the fact that detailed, expert reports were provided to the government; the court clearly demonstrated that he had not downloaded ByLock and there was no sign of it on his phone; and not a scintilla of evidence was brought forward by prosecutors to demonstrate that he had downloaded and used it, he remains locked up. The government alleges that evidence of ByLock on a cellphone is *prima facie* evidence of involvement in the events surrounding the coup attempt.

One month later, on July 5, 2017, my colleague Idil Eser, the infectiously passionate Director of Amnesty International's Turkish section, the woman who essentially does my job in Turkey, was also arrested, along with nine other prominent human rights leaders. Nearly four months later, she was released, but only conditionally, while the trial against her and the other human rights activists proceeds.

The charges they face? Supporting a terrorist organization. The evidence to back up the charges this time? Almost entirely drawn from Idil's Amnesty International human rights work.

The so-called terrorist organization that Taner and Idil and the other human rights advocates are said to support is, of course, the movement that the authorities have come to term FETO, the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization, led by Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen, who President Erdogan accuses of being responsible for the country's July 2016 coup attempt.

Amnesty International has been around for 57 years. We have taken on and confronted the world's most belligerent, dictatorial, and rights-violating governments and leaders during nearly six decades of researching and campaigning to expose and end the human rights violations for which they are responsible. And nothing like this has ever happened, anywhere, any time, during those 57 years. Never before have the two senior leaders of an Amnesty International section been arrested and imprisoned because of their human rights work.

I assure you, we are passionately of the view that defending human rights does not amount to terrorism.

We thought we had finally seen a breakthrough in Taner's case just over six weeks ago, when he was ordered conditionally released by a Turkish trial court at the end of January. But within a stunningly fast 24 hours, that release order was appealed by the prosecutor; that appeal was accepted by another court, which continued his detention; he was transferred into gendarmerie custody; and the first court that had ordered him released 24 hours earlier simply changed its mind and agreed to uphold the ruling to continue his detention. There he remains. By the time he has his next court appearance, he will have been imprisoned for more than one year.

Let me tell you that in Turkey today, the wheels of justice turn unbelievably slowly, if at all, but Taner's experience in those 24 breakneck hours over the span of January 31 and February 1 make it clear that the wheels of injustice can and do turn at a spectacularly breakneck pace.

I begin there not necessarily because Taner and Idil's experience over the last year is unique amidst the myriad human rights violations that have become the reality for thousands upon thousands of Turks; nor because their treatment was necessarily the harshest or the most cruel. I begin there because I would suggest to you that the cavalier, defiant willingness of Turkish authorities to target Amnesty International—an organization that has, I like to think, developed a reputation for credibility and global respect over many decades—in a more deliberate manner than any other government has, is a dramatic bellwether indication of how pervasive and concerning the massive and widespread human rights crackdown in Turkey over the past 21 months has become.

• (1320)

Let's bring it closer home, to Canada. There are at least six Canadian citizens, dual Turkish-Canadian nationals, known to Amnesty International who have also been ensnared in the post-coup crackdown, at least four of whom have now been convicted and sentenced, one of whom remains imprisoned and held in solitary conditions 20 months later, waiting for his trial to begin, and several of whom are pursuing appeals. Most face the same circumstantial allegations that have been brought against legions of Turks since July 2016, targeted as terrorist supporters because ByLock was on their phone, because of the schools they send their children to, or because of the banks they use.

Turkey and Canada arguably have a close and important relationship, evidenced among other ways by the fact that we are of course close NATO allies. However, our friend and ally denied Canadian diplomats consular access to most of these prisoners for at least 18 months, which is another measure of the state of human rights in Turkey.

What's the wider picture? Turkey tops the global list for the number of journalists behind bars, with over 100 journalists currently in pretrial detention, and 180 media outlets are permanently shut down. This puts Turkey ahead of such notorious competition as China and Egypt.

The state of emergency in Turkey has been renewed six times since July 2016, paving the way for unlawful restrictions on human rights and allowing the government to pass laws beyond the effective scrutiny of Parliament and the courts. Over 50,000 people are in pretrial detention, accused of links to terror groups. Among those

detained under these accusations are journalists, political activists, lawyers, human rights defenders, and academics. A similar number were released on bail and are subject to reporting requirements. Only a tiny minority of them are actually accused of having taken part in the actual events of the attempted coup.

The judiciary, itself decimated by the dismissal or detention of up to one third of Turkey's judges and prosecutors, remains under extreme political pressure. Arbitrary, lengthy, and punitive pretrial detention and fair trial violations continue routinely. Thousands of criminal prosecutions have been brought, including under laws prohibiting defamation and on trumped-up terrorism-related charges, based on people's peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression.

Over 107,000 people have been dismissed from their jobs without due process. Tens of thousands have now had their jobs restored. Many others have not. Most of those who have been dismissed cannot continue with their professions at all, and none of them can leave the country, as their passports have been cancelled.

Hundreds of civil society groups have been shut down under state of emergency decrees, including Gündem Çocuk, the leading children's rights NGO in Turkey, women's rights NGOs, and groups that assist refugees and internally displaced people. Civil society representatives, as well as the general population, are widely practising self-censorship in the country now, deleting social media posts and refraining from making public comments for fear of dismissal from their jobs, closure of their organizations, or criminal prosecution.

I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

Despite all of this, it's safe to say that Turkey has received a relatively free ride from the international community—little censure, mild criticism at best, and certainly no sanctions or anything punitive in nature. The UN Human Rights Council has just wrapped up a session in Geneva. It would have been an opportune, obvious moment and forum for states to speak out and express concern about what is happening. This was not to be. Hardly a word of concern was uttered—sadly, I have to tell you, including from Canada.

Why the silence? In a world of strained and shifting global alliances and relationships, we don't want to come down too hard on an ally? We don't want to ruffle the feathers of a country to which we continue to look to do the overwhelming bulk of heavy lifting in protecting Syrian refugees, more than three million of whom have found shelter in Turkey? European countries in particular are determined that they will remain there. Or do we not want to offend a country that, despite the rather inconvenient distraction of their current olive branch incursion into northern Syria, is viewed to be a key partner in the campaign to defeat ISIS?

• (1325)

All of that may be, and there are inevitably many other geopolitical, economic, and trade considerations that account for the international community's tepid reaction. But ignoring this crisis, refusing to take a strong stand, does no one—Turkish citizens, Canadian citizens imprisoned, Syrian refugees in the country, Kurdish populations in the region—any favours. It does none of the concerns about stability, relationships, and co-operation any favours, as a wave of continuing, extensive human rights violations ultimately serves only to create more instability and insecurity. This has to change.

As regard for human rights continues to plummet in Turkey, Canada and other nations can no longer look away. Friendship in fact calls on us to speak out and press for improvement. Taking a strong stand with respect to the rights of imprisoned human rights defenders, imprisoned journalists, and imprisoned Canadians, and for the rule of law, demanding that the state of emergency come to an end, would be a very good place to start.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Neve.

We'll move right to the first round of questions. We'll begin with MP Anderson, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our guests for being here with us today.

Mr. Kanat, I'd like to address a couple of the things you brought up. At one point you said that you believe Turkey will continue its journey to democratization. I'd like to go through some of the numbers here. It may take a couple of minutes.

The government dismissed between 100,000 and 150,000 public officials. They jailed 47,000 on terrorism charges, and 50,000 passports have been cancelled. Thousands of your soldiers have been detained. Thousands of police officers have been fired, and 2,700 plus members of the judiciary have been suspended. Over 20,000 private school teachers have been suspended, and 20,000 ministry of education officials have been fired. All of the 1,500 university deans were forced to resign, and 1,500 officials from the ministry of finance have been suspended. Then the government turned around and reinstated 40,000 plus public servants. They also along the way jailed 150 to 300 journalists, media workers; 12 parliamentarians ended up in jail; and 160 media outlets and over 1,000 NGOs and foundations were closed by degree. I guess the government then realized they had made a mistake there, because they turned around and allowed 350 of those to reopen.

Can you explain how all of this contributes to the journey to democratization?

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: I think I made it clear in my presentation that the state of emergency measures came especially as a result of the significant trauma faced by the Turkish state and Turkish society. What I mean by the Turkish journey for democratization is that immediately after the.... I believe that, because of the reasons I enumerated: society's demands, the European Union commitments, and the commitments to the European Court of Human Rights and

other international organizations. My thinking is that after the alleviation of these threats, probably an ending of these investigations...because right now the commission, which will be responsible for handling the decisions about the firings and all of this, is taking care of these cases one by one. I don't know the details of these cases, but I'm very optimistic that after the end of these threats and threat perceptions, and after the end of this trauma, there will be steps towards democratization, because the democratization process in Turkey has been there for the last 60 years.

Mr. David Anderson: I don't think what you're talking about is actually contributing to the future development of democratization there. Mr. Neve mentioned that the state of emergency has been extended six times. I guess many of us are concerned about what we consider to be a somewhat unusual referendum held for the purpose of extending the president's powers to reduce the oversight power of Parliament and increasing the appointment of political appointees to the judiciary. It has been extended numerous times since then.

Again, it must be a huge challenge dealing with the world's largest terrorist organization, but it's obvious that this is more about the president confirming and extending his powers than it is about a threat to those powers.

• (1330)

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: It is important to remember that when we are talking about terrorist organizations, we are also talking about ISIS, the PKK, and the attacks. I listed some of them. The country faced in two years more than 200 terrorist attacks. You know, after one attack in Paris there was a state of emergency, and in Turkey the people have faced multiple terrorist attacks.

The state is feeling very vulnerable, especially after the July 15 coup attempt, feeling that some of the people who are in the military, who are in the security forces, basically started to attack the state. This is a shock within the state as well.

Mr. David Anderson: I don't have a lot of time, and I'm wondering if you can tell us, then, in your view, if Pastor Andrew Brunson is being held because of his faith. He is being charged with espionage and terrorism. They seem to be very weak and strange charges, but Mr. Neve also mentioned that half a dozen Canadians are being held under these same kinds of circumstances. How do you defend that when you talk about a journey towards democratization?

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: [*Inaudible—Editor*] any case here. I'm just saying that I tried to give you a picture of Turkey's political structure and the trauma it faced. I didn't go into details about any cases because I don't have much information about these cases. As a general picture, when I see the multiple terrorist attacks and multiple different traumas and shocks that the Turkish state faced, basically the state of emergency was as a result of that.

Mr. David Anderson: I don't know if I'm surprised or not, but I had written a letter to the Turkish embassy and got a response that was remarkably similar to your presentation. I'm not sure if they had anything to do with your presentation today.

Mr. Neve, is your picture of Turkey similar to Mr. Kanat's in terms of the perception of what's happened over the last five years there?

Mr. Alex Neve: I wish we could have his confidence that the moves toward democratization remain strong. We would argue completely the contrary: that the siege on human rights, that has been unrelenting since the coup attempt, is counterproductive to any democratic process.

International human rights law does recognize that in the most extreme and limited of circumstances, a government, when faced with the immediate impact of what's often described as an emergency that threatens the life of the nation, for a very limited period of time can suspend some human rights. Twenty plus months later is far beyond that limit. The notion that it has continued to be extended six times makes a mockery of the sense that this is a state of emergency. This has become situation normal.

To my colleague, I would agree with him. We too have expressed concern about France and the fact that the state of emergency is being used in the way that it is in France. The fact that it's being misused in France does not justify its misuse in Turkey. It's an affront to human rights. It's a violation of international human rights treaties. If anything, it's only going to set back the progress toward stronger democratization.

Mr. David Anderson: Is my time up? Do I have a little time?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. David Anderson: I'd like to get a bit of information from you on the numbers of individuals who are now being held on terrorism charges. We understand that while all these people were fired, many of them were reinstated, and that there were 47,000 terrorism charges laid. Can you tell us where we're at in that area right now?

Mr. Alex Neve: We don't have an accurate up-to-date number, so I would hesitate to put one on the record. It's been very difficult to get that kind of information. Clearly, it's still absolutely in the tens of thousands. We believe that around 50,000 people are still held right now in pretrial detention, many of whom have been in there for the entire period of 20 months. Pretrial detention for 20 months again gives rise to serious concerns under international human rights.

Mr. David Anderson: Is the judicial system even more opaque now than it was before?

Mr. Alex Neve: Number one, the judicial system was itself decimated by a massive number of layoffs. It was unprecedented. I can't think of a country around the world that has seen that sort of attack on the judiciary in such a short period of time, so they had a capacity issue.

Certainly our researchers, and we hear this from others, also detect that the judiciary is cowed right now, that they themselves are fearful. There certainly are exceptions, and there have been some remarkable instances. I wouldn't want to pretend that there haven't been some wins and some people who have been released, as they should have been, but overwhelmingly we detect a judiciary that is falling into line with the government.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Anderson.

Before I turn the floor over to my colleague MP Tabbara, I want to follow up with Dr. Kanat.

On this theme of Turkey's democratization, one thing that stands out in the OHCHR report and is a particularly odious statistic is that approximately 600 women with young children were being held in detention in Turkey as of 2017. In almost all cases they were arrested as associates of their husbands—who were the government's primary suspects for connection to terrorist organizations—without separate evidence supporting the charges against them.

I wonder if you can comment on how that particular statistic is advancing democracy in Turkey.

•(1335)

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: I want to clarify one more time that I didn't say that the current state is part of democratization. I said that after the end of these threats and after the end of these investigations, Turkey will restart its democratization process. That was my remark. I think there was a misunderstanding about that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Again, to follow up on that, can you maybe clarify how the arrest and detention of 600 women, either right before or after childbirth, and the detention of those children is relieving or resolving some kind of threat being posed when none of them has faced individual charges themselves?

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: I don't know the details of these investigations. One more time, as in the previous question, I don't know the details about these investigations. I just want to provide a picture of the Turkish political structure right now and what it has gone through for the last two or three years, but I don't know the details about these investigations.

The Chair: Without speculating in details, I can tell you that it would seem to me, and certainly it would seem to the OHCHR, who describe this as an alarming pattern, that this is a gross abuse of human rights in the case of these women and their children in detention.

With that, I'll pass the floor to MP Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to pass on time to the Honourable Judy Sgro.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you, frankly, to the committee and to the chair for taking this on at several of your meetings. I know the tremendous demands that are on your plate. Thank you for taking this issue up.

I have to say, Mr. Kanat, I have heard your comments many times, and it's a continued repeat that everything is good, everything is fine, they're all terrorists, and all the rest of it. I think, frankly, Canada has respected Turkey as a NATO partner. I am the past chair of the Canada-Turkey parliamentary friendship group. I said "past" because I am no longer in that position. I could no longer stay quiet, and I don't believe Canada should stay quiet. I think it's far too long that we have given a level of respect to Turkey to solve the problems they were dealing with and to resume respect for democracy and human rights. I believe that time is up. It is time that the rest of the world starts standing up and demanding that our friend Turkey started respecting their citizens and releasing the many people who are there under detention under very little actual evidence. The fact that Turkey has used state of emergency measures six times has to tell you that it's overstepping where it's going.

What do you think Turkey is going to look like a year from now if you continue on the same path that Turkey is on now? What's Turkey going to look like a year from now? Do you think Turkey will have any friends left in the world?

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: At the end of my conversation, I basically tried to summarize the issues and why Turkey would be part of the Western-aligned structure because of its commitment to the European Union, because in a recent summit both the European Union and Turkey reiterated their commitment to continue their negotiations, continue to accession negotiations, and electoral democracy in which the people—the vibrant middle class, the youth, the women—are getting much more powerful. They are getting much more empowered.

I'm hoping that the electoral democracy, the society, and the commitments to European institutions will put Turkey in a better situation, especially after the alleviation of these threats. We are talking about a country that has a 600-kilometre border with Syria, with Iraq, that is hosting 3.5 million refugees, that has been following an open-door policy and faced the security repercussions of this open-door policy with trying to deal with YPG and trying to deal with ISIS at the same time.

It is a little bit complicated when you ask what it would look like. It will also depend on the co-operation of the international community against these threats on its southern border.

● (1340)

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: You're talking as if the coup never happened and democracy was continuing on in Turkey, which it is not. We continue to see human rights violated. Women, the wives of many of the people who are detained, have fled to Georgia. They have no passports. They're stuck with their families in isolation, in hiding, so afraid of getting picked up and taken back to Turkey. Some of their husbands have already been successful in Canada. I have met with many of them. You continue to detain dual citizens and have finally given them consular access after months.

I turned my comments over to Mr. Kanat because I wanted to ensure that Mr. Kanat knew my comments on what he has been saying—that I've heard that for several years, and I am no longer being patient and giving you space to do what I believe Turkey is doing when it's violating and should no longer be part of NATO at all.

Mr. Neve, thank you so much for being here and for the great work you do as Amnesty International. Regarding the five dual citizens who are being detained, we seem to have not been able to make any progress whatsoever in having their cases moved up and the individuals returned to Canada for justice here, if necessary. Do you have any other suggestions as to things we could do that would assist there?

Mr. Alex Neve: It's important that Canada remains firmly seized of the cases, and I think that has happened in many instances. At fairly senior levels, concerns have been raised. I know Parliamentary Secretary Alghabra, for instance, has repeatedly raised the cases. That's very important. We need to see those kinds of concerns being raised at more senior levels.

Both Minister Freeland and even the Prime Minister should be looking for opportunities they may have. Prime Minister Trudeau will, amongst other things, in the context of G20 meetings have an opportunity perhaps to meet with President Erdogan. Those kinds of opportunities need to be raised.

All of the cases are at different stages in terms of process right now. Some have still not come to trial. In one case in particular, Mr. Hanci's case, he has been in solitary confinement for most of the time in pretrial detention for over 20 months now, and he's still waiting for his trial to begin.

Some have been convicted and are awaiting appeals. The government needs to continue to raise the concern, which is a wider concern that applies in all these cases, that many of these instances seem very weak cases, going forward largely on the basis of the kinds of circumstantial evidence I highlighted before. If you have ByLock on your phone, if you used this particular bank, or if your kids went to this particular school, that's enough to allege that you're a terrorist sympathizer. That's not acceptable, and Canada should be making clear that this is not the rule of law and fundamental justice for anyone, and certainly not for a Canadian citizen.

Lastly, continuing to push for regular, unhindered consular access is absolutely important. You're right that it has finally been granted, after an unacceptably long delay, but I don't think there's confidence and assurance that it will continue with the frequency and regularity needed, so that pressure will be important as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Sgro.

We're now going to move to MP Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Mr. Neve, for your testimony today. I have three questions for you. Since we have seven minutes, I'd like to get them out to you.

First, Cheryl Hardcastle, who is our regular committee representative, and Hélène Laverdière, who is the foreign affairs critic for the NDP, wrote to the foreign affairs minister in February 2017 regarding the five Canadians being detained in Turkey. They did not receive a response until February 2018, so it took a full year. We're concerned, of course, that the government is not taking this seriously, to take a full year to even reply to a letter. Do you have comments about that?

Secondly, in what ways could we be putting pressure on the Turkish government to respect human rights? As an ally, we're seeing a real deterioration there, as you've recounted. What are other ways that Canadians or the Canadian federal government could be putting pressure on Turkey to respect human rights?

Thirdly, we have been hearing accounts from *The Independent* and *The New York Times* about the catastrophic situation in Afrin in northwestern Syria, the killing of hundreds of civilians by the Turkish air force and the Turkish army. We are also hearing accounts of ethnic cleansing taking place, or the initial signs of ethnic cleansing.

I wonder if you give credence to those reports or if it's a situation that Amnesty International is following worldwide.

• (1345)

Mr. Alex Neve: That's regrettable that there was a one-year delay in that letter. Obviously, I think the Canadian government needs to be concerned about the totality and entirety of what's happening in Turkey right now, but there is a particular extra dimension when it comes to Canadians who are ensnared in that situation.

Aside from the letter, I do know, as I said, that at the level of the parliamentary secretary there was quite a bit of attention being paid to those cases. I think we have been lacking more senior-level engagement. Perhaps the delay in that letter reflects that. I think it's really important that this start to become much more regularly on the minister's agenda and the Prime Minister's agenda as well.

In terms of pressure points open to Canada, certainly one is that Canada needs to speak out more. There have been a few very mild statements of concern. There have been occasional tweets that have gone out. But you would be hard pressed to find, if you really wanted to go back and get a clear sense as to what Canada has been saying publicly about the situation in Turkey over these last 20-plus months, anything particularly persuasive or impressive; you would have great difficulty in finding it. That's part of the kind of pressure that's needed here, I think.

What I would add to that, though, is the importance of a multilateral strategy around that. As I said in my remarks, Turkey really is getting a free ride, not just by Canada but by the world. There are some countries that have more persuasion and influence with Turkey than Canada does, most certainly, the EU being an obvious one. But countries elsewhere around the world, with whom Canada may have important relationships, may be key players here as well. If Canada is going to take the situation in Turkey seriously, I think it's developing that kind of multilateral joint strategy, which thinks about, then, how not to waste an opportunity, as we just did, like the UN Human Rights Council, and make sure there's a concerted effort among the number of countries to use that.

I could not agree more that the situation across the border in northern Syria, in Afrin, is a very, very serious concern. Amnesty has been following it and has issued a number of statements of concern. Our focus to date has primarily been with respect to very serious civilian casualties, by what we're concerned appears to be indiscriminate bombing and shelling. I don't have the time to go through them, but there are heartbreaking testimonies we've received from survivors of some of those families. For a variety of reasons, they had been led to believe by Turkish officials that their area was

going to be safe or that civilian areas were not going to be bombed and then to and behold their house was attacked when it was nowhere near any kind of military target.

It's becoming clear to us that there absolutely are some very serious violations of international law in how Turkey is carrying out that military campaign. It doesn't come as a surprise, because we know there are decades of concern about how Turkish forces have handled operations against Kurdish villages and Kurdish areas within Turkey as well, so why would it be any different across the border?

We'll continue to speak out, but I think that's another area where nations like Canada need to more clearly go on the record.

The Chair: You have another minute and half.

Mr. Peter Julian: My goodness, you were very concise.

Regarding the reports around ethnic cleansing, the reports today indicate that Kurdish signs are being ripped off in Afrin and are being replaced by signs in Turkish. There are numerous reports of homes being destroyed and Kurdish families being herded out of the region. These are all anecdotal and, of course, human rights organizations have not been allowed into that area to see to what extent ethnic cleansing is taking place.

In terms of Amnesty International, if these initial reports about ethnic cleansing taking place are true, what can the international community do to push back against what would be an egregious violation of human rights?

• (1350)

Mr. Alex Neve: We have heard those reports as well. While we have not yet been able to investigate them in such a way that we can confirm or corroborate them, I can assure you that's very live for us, including considering whether we may be able to get on the ground in some way to do some more direct investigation and so on.

If those reports are true, those are egregious violations of international law and would almost constitute, amongst other things, war crimes and crimes against humanity, which certainly should be taken up at the highest levels of the international system. One might even think of something like that appropriately being in front of the Security Council. It's also the kind of situation that very legitimately could lead to criminal prosecutions. Canada should be considering, if there was evidence to back it up and evidence that pointed to who was responsible.... Those are the kinds of things that, even under our own domestic universal jurisdiction laws for war crimes and crimes against humanity, we could and should be looking at to ensure individuals are held responsible. I think it also would be very important in the context of European settings, the European Union and the Council of Europe, that those issues are raised there.

Finally, of course, Turkey is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, and all of that would give rise to a legitimate case that should be taken in front of that body as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We shall now move to MP Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank both of you for testifying before us today.

I have real concerns about the repression of Kurdish culture and Kurdish rights in general, something that has really been a hallmark of Turkish regimes going back to the founding of modern Turkey. We have three sessions, so I will be bringing up those points in later sessions.

I am going to be splitting my time, Mr. Chair, with my colleague MP Tabbara.

Professor, I would ask you a question in the time that I do have about the importance of Turkey from a strategic perspective in the west, in NATO, and how critical Turkey's role has been when it comes to maintaining security in the alliance and regional security at large in the Middle East. There is an argument to be made that as Turkey goes, so goes the Middle East. Many have made that argument, strategic analysts and the like. I wonder if you could comment on that.

While it's important to raise issues of human rights—my colleagues have done a great job of doing that here today, I think in a very legitimate way—I also want to hear the other side. I came in a bit late because I was running from another committee meeting. If you've addressed this in your presentation, just build on that, but if you haven't, then please enlighten the committee.

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: Of course, especially since the beginning of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, Turkey's geopolitical condition has become much more significant, and it is key for the western alliance section, the NATO alliance.

As I mentioned before, it not only has 600 kilometres of border with Syria, but it also neighbours Iraq, Iran, Armenia, part of Georgia to the sea, and part of Ukraine, so it is in a critical position in the Middle East. Because of that, the stability of the country is extremely important.

Before you entered the room, I enumerated some of the terrorist attacks that Turkey has faced in the last two years. The critical point is that these civil wars and the emerging failed states do not create problems only for the Middle East. They try to export insecurity towards the region, towards Turkey, and towards Europe as well.

Turkey has been very critical in basically sealing the border with Syria, trying to arrest people who are trying to be foreign fighters. So far, more than 2,000 people have been arrested for those charges, thousands of people were deported, and there is international co-operation with countries in NATO, with the United States, with European allies, to bring down any kind of international terrorist network, whether it is Al Qaeda or ISIS. We know that with the end of the operations in Syria the counter-terrorism operations will not end. It will take time. To have these operations globally, the world will need Turkey, and Turkey will need the world.

• (1355)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thanks very much.

I'll turn it over to my colleague.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: That was the question that I had. That's what happens when you're last.

Building on what my colleague has said, have there been numerous diplomatic ties between Turkey and maybe some of the Gulf states that are more stable in the region, some would argue, and also in terms of more diplomatic ties with the west—the European Union, Canada, and the United States—in solving the issue there?

As my colleague pointed out, the region is very unstable, very volatile at this time, and we need to ensure that we have a capable partner that can help us within this region and can bring much-needed stability to a ravished region. Could you comment on that?

Dr. Kilic Bugra Kanat: Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has basically engaged in any kind of diplomatic activity that tries to bring a political solution to the problem, starting with the Geneva process, Friends of Syria, Geneva II, and now the Astana process, the Vienna process, the Sochi process. Turkey has tried to engage with any country in the region, in the world actually, regardless of its orientation, to bring a political solution to the conflict. So far, there are three dimensions of this.

In terms of the humanitarian dimension, I think Turkey did its best to handle the refugee crisis, and it is still doing its best. Especially because of the inter-operations right now, the military post that Turkey is establishing in Idlib is trying to stop another humanitarian disaster and another refugee flow from Syria to Turkey.

Politically, as I mentioned, it engages in any kind of diplomatic activity that tries to bring a solution to the problem.

Militarily, with both Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch right now, it's trying to seal its border from any kind of terrorist organizations that will create a security concern for Turkey, and terrorist organizations that may bring security concerns for the whole of Europe. As the anti-ISIS operations are winding down in Syria, the most significant problems are foreign fighters. Especially on this issue, Turkey and the western allies are working together in order to handle a possible problem in the crisis.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have a couple of minutes left, so we're going to go to MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Professor, I only have a couple of minutes. With all due respect, I profoundly disagree with you. I think all the evidence points to the most sinister, manipulative process of power grabbing that we've ever seen in the current climate of the Middle East. It behooves me to understand why the fiercest fighters against ISIS, the Kurdish peshmerga, would be the targets of Erdogan. These are people who not only fought against ISIS but had a very clear understanding of equal human rights. They fought well against ISIS and continue to do so.

My question is for you, Mr. Neve. Could you tell me if you're familiar with the case of Pastor Brunson, an American pastor? What could you tell us about it?

Mr. Alex Neve: I'm only aware of it. I actually don't know many of the details, so I'm really not able to add anything. I know that there are many who are very concerned about his plight.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay. Thank you very much. It's a very similar case to your staff, who were on the ground doing good work and then were jailed in this process.

Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate it.

Thank you to both of our guests for your testimony. We will continue with this study in the other two sessions coming up in the next week and a half.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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